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JESUS AND JOHN : A SUGGESTION TO REFORMERS.¹

(MATT. 3 : 1-12, 13-17; LUKE 3 : 1-18; JOHN 3 : 22-30; 4 : 1-3;
MATT. 11 : 2-11.)

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THE Jordan valley near the Dead Sea has few attractions beyond its awfulness. Everywhere the ancient terraces formed by the lake that once filled the valley are cut by the torrents of spring, and baked by the suns of summer, until they seem parts of nature's skeleton. Beyond them lies the Dead Sea, thirteen hundred feet below the Mediterranean, its waters, beautiful though they are, the source of death. All about are the memories of tragedy and human loss. Here Sodom and Gomorrah were annihilated; here Elijah crossed the river to die like Moses somewhere in yonder mountains; on the eastern cliff John the Baptist was beheaded, and on the western the last band of Jewish revolutionists killed one another rather than fall into the hands of Rome. Not even the gardens of Jericho can rid the great valley of these memories.

Somewhere in this region John the Baptist appeared, a fit hero for his surroundings. His years in the wilderness had bred in him no graces of person or graciousness of message. His mission, as he conceived it, was to call a people from their sins by the threat of approaching punishment. Judgment was on the way; wrath was preparing. Even his greater message, which to men of a later day has meant so much of divine love, was one of terror. The Messiah was to come. He himself was indeed his herald, but the Messiah who was thus heralded was to be no lowly king or representative of God's grace, but a mighty judge, whose ax was ready to cut down the unfruitful tree and whose fire was to burn the useless chaff.

¹ This sketch is intended to illustrate a possible method for the study of the gospels in a prayer-meeting. Let the passages first be read and then studied in the light of the statements here made. Reprints may be obtained if desired.

The very fierceness of the man's call to righteousness won him hearers. In these days the oppressed Jews were on tiptoe looking for a deliverer, and for a new Elijah who should announce his coming. In this long-haired man in his coarse tunic and rude girdle they suspected that their Elijah, or even the Christ, had appeared. They went to him in crowds—the poor, the learned, the soldiers, the very tax collectors. He had a message for them all, appropriate, but not gracious. He who was a few weeks later to rebuke a king's adultery, though it brought him death, was not likely to flatter self-righteousness in any form. The learned were to him a brood of snakes; the soldiers were to reform by giving up the vices of soldiers; the publicans, by stopping their exactions; all the people, by confessing their sins, by being baptized in Jordan, and by beginning a better life. Only on those conditions could he promise them any prospect of escape from the doom that was close upon them. And even then there was the prospect of a Messiah who would cleanse with fire where he himself had cleansed with water. It was not an attractive prospect, but the crowds took him at his word. He was their preacher, and his message of judgment, if indeed it was alarming, was at least no respecter of persons. The Pharisee and the aristocracy, quite as much as they, were subject to its conditions. They flocked to the river side, and there they listened and repented and were baptized. The Jordan rushed along through its muddy banks bordered with oleanders and willows, and almost swept preacher and crowds away. The sun beat upon them as it beats in almost no other spot on earth; the hot, close air of the valley brought faintness and depression; but day after day the desert preacher thundered his messages of judgment and repentance, and the people went down into the river confessing their sins.

Although John did not know it, the Messiah whom he foretold was already come. Among those who stood by the river bank there was a young man of perhaps thirty years—Jesus, a carpenter of Nazareth. Led by his devotion to all that seemed of God, perhaps being in attendance upon some feast at Jerusalem, he had come down into the valley and asked John for

baptism. It was less a consciousness of sin that moved him than a determination to have some share in the messianic movement which John was inaugurating. Yet John, who had not hesitated to denounce every class of society which had come to him for baptism, at first declined to receive Jesus on the ground that, if the baptizer should be the better man, Jesus should baptize and he himself repent. On what opinion this was based we cannot tell. It may be the young men knew each other; it may be that the keen eye of the prophet read the soul of the newcomer. But whatever the cause of his hesitation, the words of Jesus convinced him, and that "all righteousness might be fulfilled," and that God might be justified, the two walked in silence to the deeper water, and John baptized Jesus.

Not the remarkable change this act of consecration occasioned in the life of Jesus, but the significance of the act so far as it concerned his relations with the mission of John, concerns us. No conception of life and righteousness could be more unlike John's than his. If he, too, lived by Jordan, it was by the Sea of Galilee with its wealth of life. He was no ascetic, and his God was a God of love. Social life was to him as righteous as natural, and to be a lover of God it was not necessary to wear rough clothes or shun the abode of men. He did not hesitate later to call attention to the insufficiency of John's teaching when compared with the privileges of his own disciples. So far, indeed, did his whole manner of life differ from that of John that, while their enemies refused to accept the one as a fanatical ascetic, with equal exaggeration they branded the other as a tippler and a glutton. And yet Jesus enrolled himself as a follower of John. Beneath the prophet's severity and asceticism and fierce wrath at sin Jesus saw a passion for righteousness, a faith in a new social order that God himself must have inspired. To hold aloof from such a reformer because of his dress or his food or his imperfect program would have made him untrue to his own deepest convictions and self-respect; it would have allied him with the enemies of reform. With the Jewish people growing desperate under oppression and losing their fine sense of righteousness under a scholastic theology, there was no time for

those who really were in earnest for reform to quarrel over details. Even a carpenter of Nazareth had a duty to perform. And therefore, although he rejected the peculiarities of the fanatic, he threw himself into the cause of the reformer.

This unwillingness to interfere with an honest fellow-worker for human betterment, even when he was not wholly in sympathy with his methods, marked the entire life of Jesus. The disciples might want to burn down inhospitable villages and discourage any teacher who did not belong to their company. The times in Palestine were not conducive to any great gentleness of life or sweetness in theology. Everything was rushing to the great cataract of revolution. But Jesus was as catholic in thought as he was penetrating in foresight. He who was not against him, he declared, was for him. Nor would he be exclusive in reform, however he might be convinced as to the superiority of his own program. Not so very long after his baptism a few of John's disciples had gone over to him, and the over-zealous friends of the Baptist endeavored to create friction between the two men. But in the case of each they reckoned without their men. John admitted the superiority of his former disciple, and Jesus stopped his work in Judea, returned to Galilee, and waited for a more favorable opportunity. A reform, however partial, if only it were clearly of God's planning, was not to be hindered by the efforts of its friends—even by those whose methods were less pronounced, and whose teachings were more in accord with God's true nature. Nor did Jesus withhold praise for the man whose work he continued. After John was imprisoned, and about to die a martyr to his rôle of censor of royal morals, he seems to have grown doubtful, if not impatient. Jesus was not acting as John had hoped he would act, and he had sent to recall his former followers to what he supposed was the Messiah's duty. Such interference was ill-timed, and calculated to injure both John and the cause he had championed. But Jesus was not to be irritated into criticism. After he had sent a reply to the imprisoned man's questions, that was but a summons to faith in the Scriptures both revered, he turned to the crowds that were then following him and recalled them to a sense of

their obligation to his herald. But again he discriminated. Not the fanatic but the reformer, not his friend's fierceness or asceticism, received his praise. The least of his own followers was nearer absolute truth than John. But his words were as generous as they were true; with all his deficiencies John was the greatest of men outside the kingdom of God, and later, when alone with his disciples, he said: "If ye can receive it, this is Elijah that should come."

And the work of John, thanks to the devotion of Jesus, outgrew the exaggeration of its first leader to become in the hands of Jesus a synonym of all that is sane and lovable. John's real work lived. His peculiarities vanished, but had Jesus acted otherwise, had he attempted to correct the details without championing the essentials, he would have destroyed the influence, not alone of John, but, so far as we can see, of himself.

He is truly the friend of reform who can overlook the eccentricities and the exaggerations of his fellow-reformers, and, like Jesus as he took up the work of John, waiving discussion over details and unessentials, be they never so unacceptable, join hands and heart with every man who is seeking to prepare for God's kingdom.